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THE VENTURE

THE VENTURE

Poems

BY

JEAN KENYON MACKENZIE

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1925

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The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

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Thanks are due to the Editors of the *Atlantic Monthly Magazine* and *McClure's Magazine*.

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THE VENTURE

THE VENTURE

I NEVER see a map but I'm away
On all the errands that I long to do,
Up all the rivers that are painted blue,
And all the ranges that are painted gray,
And into those pale spaces where they say:
'Unknown.' Oh, what they never knew
I would be knowing — were it not for you
I would be off to-morrow with the day!

Then, since I am at anchor at your door,
Befriend the wistful stranger; make me free
Of all your little country and its store
Of unknown things and wonders — spread for me
The chart and let me venture, till I find
The secrets of your beauty and your mind.

CABINED FIRE

Birds are free
And winds are free,
And I, with head upon your knee,
Am free;
But oh, the birds and winds are rushing by
In every way of freedom, wide and high,
Whilst I
Beside the cabined fire
Trace all the north and south of my desire,
And all my freedom's farthest east and west,
Upon your breast.

THE SNOWY NIGHT

LET us be happy to-night—
It snows.
See where the hemlocks glimmer white
In the dusk and the snow and the half moonlight;
They never stir as their burden grows.

And you—O lovely and pale and near—
Loosen the bond of your maiden will;
Fall on my heart like the falling snows,
And I will be still as the trees are still.

SIX SONGS

I

She was the little wind that falls
Before the falling of the rain;
She was the one and early star
We lose and see and lose again.

She was the pang of the caress
That is too brief for our delight;
She was the torch another bore
And passed us in the night.

II

Suddenly, up through the forest gloaming,
A partridge rose, and that urgent whirring
Startled our breath and checked our roaming;
We stood and were still where the leaves
were stirring.

So from the place of my deepest grieving
Memory starts on a wing so thrilling,
I stand in the dusk of my self-deceiving,
Struck to the heart with a pang that is killing.

III

In the street where you went away,
In the air that is still and gray,
Like golden fish in a stream
The leaves of the maple gleam;

And down in a place apart,
In the dark and the deep of my heart,
You shine in the pool of my grief
Like a fallen golden leaf.

IV

If you should say,
'Who goes there?'
Then I would say,
'You go there—
It's your hand at the door
And your foot on the stair
Of my heart every day
And everywhere.'

Then you would say,
'It is long since I passed.'
And I would say,
'It is year before last
Since you went on your way,
But I still hear you there
In my heart every day
And everywhere.'

V

I saw you as you passed
A hundred times before;
Oh, come you in at last
And close the open door.

Oh, close the door and mark
How deep a night is this;
And light our common dark
With the candle of your kiss.

VI

Where the lamp of peace is lit
Pass and never sigh,
Lest your sighing trouble it
In your going by,
Lest your sighing beat about
That faint flame and it die out.

Every passing air of Spring
Knocks upon the door;
Lean more lightly, lest it swing
Open as before—
And the inmate, roused at last,
Draw you in and hold you fast.

THE FOREIGNER

I WILL go
Into far countries; I will know
Strange kindly people there, and so
Make friends in loneliness.
I'll be
Less alien there than when I see
My foreign nature in your eyes, that say
How far away I am — how far and far away
From any speech of yours, or place or part
Under the roof and shelter of your heart.

THE YOUNG GIRL

If I knew a snare,
I would not spread it;
If I knew your way,
I would not tread it;
Though the tear is quick,
I will not shed it.

Nothing in me means
To give a token —
Oh, but if you pass,
My heart is broken
With the tear unshed,
The word unspoken.

THE DAWN

This year I love you and I cannot sleep;
I weep at night who am too proud to weep;
I hope good things a little while, and then
Those sadder thoughts come darkly back again.

Only last night I lay and thought of you —
I could not help it — till the morning dew
Smelled strangely sweet; and then I seemed to know
I might forget if I could let you go.

THE WISH

Before I could be wise I wore
A beaten pathway to your door,
And all the traffic of my day
Went up and down that narrow way.

And now that I am wise and keep
My love at home, and half asleep,
I only wish the grass would grow
To hide the way I used to go.

THE EMPTY HOUSE

All day the board was spread for you, all day the fire burned,
All day I waited for you more and more;
But my heart turned with the shadows when the evening shadows turned,
And a sudden wind of change has clapped the door.

I leave the bread and wine for you, the ember on the stone,
The key beneath the threshold wet with dew—
I'm off and down the road again I used to walk alone,
Before I ever built a house for you.

THE SEAL

Across the yielding of her tender heart
A word was written, as you must have seen—
A hieroglyphic, and a thing apart
From any other she might say or mean.

And oh, if ever you rejoiced to feel
You did possess her, and you told her so,
You saw how quick her little hand to steal
And cover over what you might not know.

YOU WOULD LAUGH IF YOU KNEW

You would laugh if you knew
How forever in my heart I think of you.

I'm sick for you
As if you were my home;
I long for you
More than for old adventures or for new.

I have slept
Under stars and under dew
Far from here, and I regret
Stranger, sweeter things than you
Ever knew or could be knowing of, and yet
I'll forget.
I'm sick for you
As if you were my home. I long for you
More than for old adventures or for new.

THE TRODDEN WAYS

LIKE nameless wandering trails that stray
From off the road and make away
Beneath green leaves, and never say
What they are meaning—where they go—
But tempt me ever till I know—

So in yourself I am aware
Of trodden ways that vanish where
Yourself is secret—Oh, beware!
My feet pursue you—I must go
Forever deeper till I know.

THE WILD HEART

Your heart is so wild,
But your hands are like flowers;
They are folded and mild
On the red of your dress,
They are patient for hours.

The pulse in your wrist
And the beat in your breast
Hurry forever,
But your hands are at rest;
They are folded and mild,
They have never confessed
That your heart is so wild
In the cage of your breast.

A VALENTINE

The little stone is brightest
Below the water's mark;
The little star is whitest
Against the deepest dark,

And where the wood is deepest
And hemlocks dim the air
The whitest little birches
Hang out the brightest hair.

By these, and by the coral
Forever lost at sea
I beg my little darling
To fall in love with me.

WHAT IS THIS LEAF?

WHAT is this leaf that reddens on the wall?
This is the leaf that falters first of all—
It is the Fall.

What is this hour so quickly overcast?
This is the hour that shall not be surpassed—
It is the last.

What is this kiss where sweet and bitter blend?
I was your lover and I am your friend—
It is the end.

LISTEN!

The little tender Pleiades
That sink into the sea,
They drown without a cry,
And I
Shining dim
In my little web of light—
I touch upon oblivion,
I drown without a sigh
Because you ignore me,
Because you pass me by.

THE OLD FOLKS SAY

In time of war,
The old folks say,
Death called the lads
And they all sped away;
Death called the lads,
And each with his pack
They were quick to be gone,
But they all looked back.

In time of peace,
The old folks say,
Life calls the lads
And they all speed away;
They never speak of the thing they lack,
But they fret to be gone
And they never look back.

It is still in the house,
The old folks say,
With the year on the wane
And the lads all away.

IF ONCE I GOT AWAY

If we lived in a town
Where I could go to sea,
The white sail of a ship
Would be the last of me.

If once I got away,
I'd surely find a friend
More kind than you have been,
And a wanderer in the end
Forgets his dearest friend.

But oh, I'd fear to feel,
In some strange foreign bay,
How every one at home
Might see you every day—
And me so far away!

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THE WARNING

The flower you let fall
From the blind side of your wall
Is the only flower for me.
Oh, if you hunt at all
For your flower, have a care—
In the shadow I am there.

The kiss you thought you kept
I have stolen while you slept,
With the tear you shed for me
When you did not know you wept—
I will never part with these
Though you beg me on your knees.

THE CAPTIVE

In the shadow of the eaves
Rot a sail and a canoe;
Thick upon them drift the leaves
Dark with rain and with the dew;
Lady, when the prisoner grieves,
Think how wide the sea—how blue!

All the vagabonds of earth
Sleep untented in the airs;
Lady, you may guess your worth
By the chain the prisoner wears;
When he falters in his mirth,
Bar the door and say your prayers.

MIRRORS

These many verses that I make for you
Are many mirrors; in them you may see
Your very self — or what I swear to be
Your very self. And if you never knew
You are a bird, a flower, flame and dew,
A moon, a climbing tide, a leafing tree,
Then gaze in all these mirrors, made by me —
Make friends of all these truths — they may
be true!

My verses are a cup; I have expressed
The wine that is yourself — the golden brew
That is distilled in all my thought of you;
The cup is full, it sparkles, it is pressed
Against your lip of laughter — you must taste
How heady is the vintage that you waste!

LIGHT AS LEAVES

Above the highways where I walk,
Between me and the sky,
There is a light and whispering talk
Of leaves about to die;
And from the stricken maple-tree
The leaves drift down and follow me.

I hear the rustling on the ground
Pursue me as I go;
I listen to that haunting sound
Until I seem to know
That light as leaves in autumn air
The one I lost is following there.

WHEN I THINK OF YOU

When I think of you
One single pang I feel,
As if an archer drew
An arrow at a mark,
And oh, that aim is true!

Then all my longings pass
Across my heart as vain
As shadows in a glass,
Or the little, little rain
Upon November grass.

THE NAME

They say a thousand words,
And then they speak your name.
A flight of passing birds
Are all their thousand words,
And they are all the same
But one — that is your name.

I startle when they say
Your name; when that is said,
I watch it fly away
With all the words they say,
And wish a net were spread
To catch the name they said.

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AFRICAN EXILE

THE BEGGAR

Oh, I will make the clearing, Lord,
And I will plant the corn;
I'll sleep beneath the stranger stars
And rise before the morn,
To build the little cabin where
The future shall be born.

To Abraham the exile, Lord,
What promises were thine!
He might not know the sum of them,
But he might see them shine
In all the stars and all the sands
Thou settest for a sign.

Such starry signs and promises
I do not ask of thee;
I am thy servant, Lord, for love,
And love is all my fee;
But just a little dream of home—
Would that be spoiling me?

THE WHITE MAN'S HEART

The narrow canoes with the dawn
Take the surf with a leap and are gone—
And the heart in the white man's breast
Would leap and be gone with the rest.

Oh, bright are the silvery hues
Of the catch in the narrow canoes—
But the heart of the white man yet
Hangs furled like an empty net.

To the spring at the edge of the town
The path in the grass is brown—
So the thoughts of the white man's heart
Wear a path to a place apart.

Oh, sweet is the water poured
From the neck of the black girl's gourd—
But the white man thirsts the more
For the well at his father's door.

THE WHITE MAN'S DREAMS

By his clay-daubed wall, that is silver-bright
In the wash of the white moonbeams,
Where the dark of his door is wide to the night,
The lonely white man dreams.

Where the moon is broad on the forest way
And the black men go and come,
The tribes that trouble the white man's day
Dance to the beaten drum.

To the ceaseless drum, and the broken call,
And the shout, and the storm of sound,
They dance and are dark, and they trample all
Their shadows, dark on the ground.

The dream that the white man waits—alas!—
It is a thing so slight;
If these are the ways by which it must pass,
How may it pass to-night?

THE BRIBE

The butterflies are bright above the trail;
They lace the bush with scarlet and with blue;—
O little dream, so faithful and so frail,
The jewel of their beauty is for you.

Hard on the Southern Cross the Centaurs ride;
They point their starry spears the long night through.
O little restless dream, be still and bide!
The jewel of that beauty is for you.

The white man knows the treasure of the land—
The dawn, the secret flower, the silver dew;—
O little dream, hold out your hollowed hand!
The jewel of their beauty is for you.

THE FAREWELL

Alien earth and alien river-brink;
Alien stars that stand before the door;
Small sad house that sheltered all my sleep—
I am gone and shall return no more.

Small sad house that shook beneath the rain;
Leaf-thatched roof that rustled in the sun—
You are left all brown among the trees,
Like a nest when nesting-time is done.

Here I dreamed, and here I woke to weep;
Hence I go, to dream and weep no more.
Leaf-thatched house, I leave you to your sleep;
Wistful dream—behold, I bar the door!

THE RETURN

When I returned to my poor house,
As well I knew I must,
The thatch was rotting in the rain,
The latch was stiff with rust,
And little forest creatures' feet
Had written in the dust.

Strange thing! In that poor house of mine —
Unlit this year or more —
Where I had dread to live alone,
There met me at the door
That unforgotten dream of mine
I used to dream before!

AFRICAN YOUTH

On the trails that are all day long,
Where the young of the forest throng,
The caravans of Youth
Pass with their smiting song.

On the head of the girl that is young,
Where the thousand beads are strung,
The glamour of youth is shed
And the flower of youth is hung.

Bright at the lad's dark side
Hangs the terrible sword of Pride,
And swift is the thrust of youth
At the wound that the old men hide.

With the sword that is Beauty's sting,
And the speed that is Beauty's wing,
To the throb that is Beauty's drum,
They pass and the shadows spring.

THE YOUNG TRADER

All day beneath the storehouse thatch
He trafficked in the spoil,
And weighed the plunder of the bush,
The ivory and the oil;

But when night fell upon the flame
Of burning tropic day,
And you might see the evil land
Beneath the moon at play,

Then Allan would come up the road,
In linen frayed and white,
To knock upon a fellow's door
And sit with him the night;

To crack his homely country jokes,
To rise at last and say —
'I must be getting down the road!'
Oh, Allan, won't you stay?

Young Allan died — he was the first
Of three I watched beside.
I sat and thought of youth and death
The night young Allan died.

His little day upon the beach —
How long, long passed away!
And still I hear his country speech
And still I hear him say —

'I must be getting down the road!'
Oh, Allan — must you so?
How light you are of any load,
How quick you are to go!

THE HOME-GOER

The jewels of the Southern Cross
Are fallen every one;
I would not turn the ship about
For loss of star or sun;
I would not turn the ship about
For all the stars, to hunt them out.

About the ship's side in the dark
How bright the fires shine!
The trembling fires of my delight
That kindle in the brine,
The primrose fires of my delight,
How quick about the ship at night!

The figure at the keen prow leaps
And runs upon the blue,
The ship's heart like a man's heart yearns
To northward and to you;
And, like my heart, the ship's heart yearns
And sobs and hurries and returns.

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